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Lifelogging: What it's like to record your whole life

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Gordon Bell, one of the first people to chronicle his existence digitally, explains how it has changed his life and the potential pitfalls

How did lifelogging take off?

The secret was to be interviewed by *New Scientist*: your [2002 article](#) about our [MyLifeBits](#) project was so widely read by other journalists that coverage snowballed.

What devices were you logging with at first?

The one device everybody has: the PC. All your email, your correspondence and documents – that side of your life is already in there. Then we got scanners. Then digital cameras. Then heart-rate monitoring armbands in 2002, GPS trackers in 2004 and wearable SenseCams in 2005. Data sources proliferated.

Everyone has a smartphone now. Have they changed the landscape?

Oh my god, yes. They have totally transformed it and made lifelogging almost implicit. They offer a very accurate log of where somebody is. Their broad array of sensors – compass, GPS, orientation, audio, video – and their massive memories can record so much that they are the personal mainframe you carry on your body. Their impact has not yet been fully felt – far from it.

Do you ever read your own lifelogs?

I don't really go back and look at my life using them. It's just an alternative "memory", where I go to get facts about something if I need to.

Has lifelogging had any effect on your behaviour?

It has made me very smug. I have become a little bit of a librarian in my immediate family, able to sort out arguments about when somebody's birthday is or when a bill came in, for example. The key thing is never to keep anything on paper. Paper is terrible as it's unsearchable.

Is it a good idea not to record certain things?

For video to be truly useful, you need audio too – but sound recording can get you in deep trouble over privacy. And for things like washrooms you need to be able to disable video recording with a quick button press. SenseCams did not have that capability early on, but they do now.

Can others use our lifelogs for their own ends?

They are already doing that. Our online click streams are in effect activity logs, and a frightening amount of that is being used for advertising, to sell us things. I'd like to see that cut out. The loggers should benefit from logging, not sales companies.

What role can lifelogs play after the logger dies?

I wrote a conversational program, for a company called Cognea, that allows a chatbot to mine lifelogs. It lets you ask the chatbot the same questions you would have asked the person when still alive – like "where did you grow up?" By consulting their logs, it should be able to answer any question that they could have answered.

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"It has made me very smug" (Image: Hugh Kretschmer)

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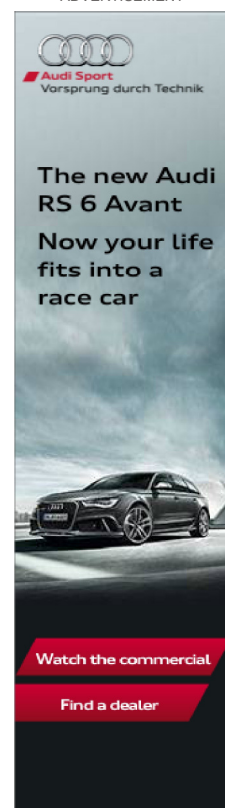
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Technology can quickly become obsolete. Does that problem affect lifelogging too?

After 15 years I'm hitting a few such problems already – and if you're trying to keep data for a century? All I can say is JPEG had better be there.

This article appeared in print under the headline "Your digitised world"

Profile

Gordon Bell worked at Digital Equipment Corporation before joining Microsoft's Silicon Valley telepresence lab in 1995. In 2002 he launched MyLifeBits, a project designed to digitally chronicle all aspects of our lives



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